

Conspiracy, Pornography, Democracy: The Recurrent Aesthetics of the American Illuminati

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This essay examines reactionary, countersubversive fictions produced in the context of two conspiracy theories in the United States: the Illuminati crisis (1798–1800) and Pizzagate (2016–17). The author suggests that both cases emblemize a pornotropic aesthetic, a racialized sadomasochism that recurs across United States culture. Building on the work of Hortense Spillers, Alexander Weheliye, Jennifer Christine Nash, and others, this essay argues that observers should understand countersubversive political reaction as an aesthetic project, a pornotropic fantasy that distorts underlying conditions of racial subjection. In the context of a resurgent far right that describes its enemies as “cuckolds” and frequently deploys the tropes of highly racialized pornography, this essay suggests that we might find the deep origins of pornographic, reactionary paranoia in the eighteenth century. It suggests, moreover, that understanding and contesting the underlying conditions of racial subjection require that scholars consider the power of pornotropic, countersubversive aesthetics to bring pleasure, to move people, and to order the world.

The cultural production of paranoia has long been a concern of literary scholars. Even before the recent proliferation of conspiracy theories about, for instance, a child-sex ring in a Washington, DC pizza parlor, scholars of American literary studies, in particular, have been noting among cultural producers a rearticulation of counterconspiratorial fictions – in essence, fictions that describe totalizing conspiracies to be discovered and contested. Russ Castronovo, for instance, notes that the emergence of Wikileaks in the global mediascape recalls an eighteenth-century “printscape” of politically transformational frauds, leaks, and conspiracies. Early US printer Philip Freneau, Castronovo points out, lauded a democratic discourse characterized by outright falsehood. “If he prints some lies,” Freneau suggested of the archetypical country printer, “his lies excuse.”¹ Castronovo and others – from

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¹ Russ Castronovo, *Propaganda, 1776: Secrets, Leaks, and Revolutionary Communications in Early America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–9, 156.

Elizabeth Maddock Dillon to Duncan Faherty to Ed White – have returned to the scenes of counterconspiratorial politics, moreover, in response to important recent changes in the United States.² They discover, finally, that fraudulent and paranoid modes of cultural production have long been constitutive of US democracy. One can perhaps best understand the project of returning to scenes of counterconspiratorial writing as continuous with Richard Hofstadter’s foundational “Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964), but with a key difference. Whereas Hofstadter interrogated democratic paranoia as a means of establishing the boundaries of consensus liberalism, and of excluding modes of political discourse that had no place within that framework, more recent scholars have suggested that frauds, leaks, lies, paranoid mass movements, and imagined conspiracies are, in fact, continuous with American democracy itself.

This essay will return to Hofstadter’s point of departure, the so-called US Illuminati crisis of 1798 and 1799, for two reasons. First, and most simply, I will offer a minor historical corrective to studies of the counterconspiratorial crisis in the United States. In the late 1790s, anti-Enlightenment writers in the Atlantic world fantasized about a secret society of Bavarian university professors who had masterminded the French Revolution and were spreading the spirit of upheaval to other nations, including Great Britain and the United States of America. They called this imagined cabal the “Illuminati,” both drawing from the name of an actual Bavarian secret society that had disbanded in 1787 and conjuring through wordplay the central metaphor of the Enlightenment itself: intellect as illumination. Most scholars of this history dwell on the imagined conspiracy’s emergence in 1797 (in Great Britain) and 1798 (in the US), and so ignore how a paranoid fantasy about conspiratorial intellectuals had transformed by 1799 into a fear of black revolutionaries from Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) and the US South.³ To put as fine a point on this claim as possible: by 1799, the Illuminati crisis in the United States was characterized by a fear that global intellectual elites were conspiring with subaltern black men to rape white women, enslave white men, and destroy

² Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 252; Duncan Faherty, “The Mischief That Awaits Us’: Revolution, Rumor, and Serial Unrest in the Early Republic,” in Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Michael Drexler, eds., *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States: Histories, Textualities, Geographies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 58–79; Ed White, “The Value of Conspiracy Theory,” *American Literary History*, 14, 1 (2002), 24–25.

³ Numerous scholars have read Saint-Domingue (later Haiti) as a site of Gothic fantasy and revulsion for readers in the United States during the early republican period. See, for instance, Matt Clavin, “Race, Rebellion, and the Gothic: Inventing the Haitian Revolution,” *Early American Studies*, 5, 1 (2007), 1–29.

Christianity and democracy in a single stroke. By examining the sermons, pamphlets, novels, and even library records of the Illuminati crisis, this essay will consider how fantasies of *racial* violence transformed the conspiracy theory in the United States and produced an aesthetic model for racialized paranoia.

Second, I suggest that noting the relation between race and paranoia reveals the pornotropic style of paranoid democratic politics in the United States. The “pornotrope,” first theorized by Hortense Spillers and reconsidered in recent years by Alexander Weheliye and others, places the experiences of black women during Atlantic slavery and after at the center of discourse. Importantly, Weheliye writes, the pornotrope concerns “the sexual dimensions of objectification” in spaces of “extreme political and social domination.” The word traces multiple etymological trajectories and multiple histories of violence: *porno*, from Greek, referred to enslaved women sold for the purposes of prostitution; *trope*, also from Greek, referred to a “turn” or “manner”; and *trope*, from Latin, referred to a recurring figure of speech. In short, then, the pornotrope functions as a figuration of racialized, sexual subjection that turns (now toward the violence of bondage, now toward the violence of sexual exploitation), but one that also recurs across time and space.⁴ By suggesting that the paranoia of the Illuminati crisis manifested as pornotrope, then, I am attempting to consider the ways in which reactionary political paranoia manifests violent, recurring fantasies of racialized sexual subjection and of bondage. The political paranoid seeks revelation, an unmasking of the heretofore concealed operations of power. But this final revelation is – to borrow Hofstadter’s phrase – seen always through “distorting lenses.”⁵ It was no secret, for instance, that racial slavery constituted a relation of sexual subjection, and yet the political paranoids of the Illuminati crisis sought to unmask this obvious reality. What they suggested, ultimately, was a radical inversion of slavery’s fundamental organization. Of course, they suggested, white men subjected black women to sexual domination. But the *secret* plot – the plot that had to be revealed – was that black men would very soon subject white women to the same sexual enslavement. What emerged, finally, was a voyeuristic political discourse premised on the subjection of all women.

⁴ Alexander Weheliye, “Pornotropes,” *Journal of Visual Culture*, 7, 1 (2008), 65–81, 67; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 89–112. See also Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics*, 17, 2 (1987), 64–81, 67.

⁵ Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Nov. 1964, 77–86, 86.

The inversion described above was not subtle. In his 1799 oration celebrating the Fourth of July in Hartford, Connecticut, William Brown warned of the Illuminati and asked his listeners to imagine “the groans of wretched white-men, butchered by their infuriate slaves, the shrieks of mothers, and of virgins, a prey to more than demoniac lust and barbarity.” Brown went on to describe French soldiers, who had cast off all Christian belief, “joining in the impure and shocking death-dance of Africa.”⁶ Yale president Timothy Dwight likewise asked, “Shall ... our daughters [become] the concubines of the Illuminati?”⁷ Behind the ubiquitous characterization of Enlightenment philosophy as a project of secret, totalizing power lay scenes of sexual subjection and bondage. Granted, the circumstances of the Illuminati crisis were highly contingent and local. Orthodox Congregational ministers, threatened by the erosion of their influence in the face of both secularism and enthusiastic Christianity, discovered an explanation for social change in a conspiracy theory that described Enlightenment liberalism as a sinister force ordering world events.⁸ Yet the aesthetic quality of this countersubversive fantasy was pornotropic. The fantasy centered on the sadistic, and often masochistic, desires through which whiteness and hegemonic masculinity are constituted.

The simultaneous anxiety and fantasy expressed by eighteenth-century countersubversives – that black men will, in combination with intellectuals and foreigners, sexually dominate white people – should be recognizable to even the most casual observer of contemporary conspiracy theories. An emblematic example can be found in the widespread use of the epithet “cuckservative” by white supremacists and counterconspiratorial writers today, including those who were part-authors of the so-called “Pizzagate” and “Gamergate” conspiracy theories. According to an analysis by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the word reached mainstream usage through Gamergate conspiracy theorist @Drunknsage, and it essentially describes a Republican who cuckolds himself by cooperating with then President Barack Obama, an intellectual and a black man.⁹ Essentially, “cuckservative”

⁶ William Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford, in the State of Connecticut, on the Anniversary of American Independence, July 4th A.D. 1799* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1799), 6, 20.

⁷ Timothy Dwight, *The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis, Illustrated in a Discourse, Preached on the Fourth of July, 1798* (New-Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1798), 20–21.

⁸ Bryan Waterman, “The Bavarian Illuminati, the Early American Novel, and Histories of the Public Sphere,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 62, 1 (2005), 9–30, 11, 17; Waterman, *Republic of Intellect: The Friendly Club of New York City and the Making of American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 50–91.

⁹ Hatewatch Staff, “Getting Cucky: A Brief Primer on the Radical Right’s Newest ‘Cuckservative’ Meme,” Southern Poverty Law Center, 7 Aug. 2015, at www.splcenter.com.

recapitulates the white-supremacist aesthetics of paranoia in US culture even as its contingent politics manifest in different contexts and among different sociopolitical communities. I am suggesting, then, that we can best understand the reiterative aesthetic logics of conspiracy in the United States as a kind of literary trope, specifically as a pornotrope. Such recognition, I suggest, reveals not only the literary character of conspiracy theory, but also its pleasurable quality. Countersubversives, in short, derive erotic pleasure from the fictional, even Gothic, conspiracies through which they produce paranoid forms of sociality.

United States democracy has long been characterized by fantasies of totalizing, all-powerful enemies, of sexual subjection, and of inescapable racial violence. The particular politics of such fantasies are historically specific, and yet their aesthetics are surprisingly recurrent. As Castronovo suggests, moreover, aesthetic choices *are* political choices, and they “can echo with compulsion, implicitly demanding that all others subscribe” to their conception of the beautiful or, I would add, the disgusting, the terrifying, or the erotic.¹⁰ What I propose here, then, is that we trace the pornotropic rearticulations of paranoid white supremacy through democratic discourse. If paranoia is a style, as Hofstadter suggested a half-century ago, then it is a style characterized by sadomasochistic aesthetics. I do not mean to collapse the highly contingent politics and histories of particular paranoid moments, but I do mean to suggest that these moments have revealed a recurrent representational logic. Attention to this logic, finally, will reveal the compelling power of conspiratorial fantasy as it comes roaring back into the center of political life in the United States.

THE SADMASOCHISTIC AESTHETICS OF RACIAL DEMOCRACY

If the present moment demands a reconsideration of paranoia in US politics, as I suggest it does, then Hofstadter’s “paranoid style” remains an important – if imperfect – point of departure. The problem with Hofstadter’s mid-twentieth-century view of political paranoia, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observed, is not that it misunderstands such paranoia in any fundamental way. Rather, the problem is that the original audience for Hofstadter’s essay appears to have vanished, if it ever existed in the first place. In the intervening half-century since Hofstadter published “The Paranoid Style,” paranoia has proliferated

org/hatewatch/2015/08/07/getting-cucky-brief-primer-radical-rights-newest-cuckservative-meme, accessed 10 May 2017.

¹⁰ Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 215; and Castronovo, *Propaganda, 1776, 177–80*.

even among those in positions of social authority. Throughout his discussion of the deep history of conspiracy theories in US culture, Hofstadter imagines a reasonable, detached, and secular liberal reader. As Sedgwick explains: “there remains,” in Hofstadter’s essay, “a presumptive ‘we’ – apparently still practically everyone – who can agree to view such [counterconspiratorial] extremes from a calm, understanding, and encompassing middle ground.”¹¹ This audience, Hofstadter seems to imagine, recognizes that the operations of power are contingent and local. There is no totalizing force able to order world events, and even the politically powerful are constrained in the realization of their goals. Sedgwick observed that such a consensus reader (if such a reader ever existed) has long since departed from mainstream political discourse. In place of this reader, we have a welter of competing conspiracies, a widespread mistrust of institutions, and a fractured media landscape more akin to the late eighteenth century than to the mid-twentieth.

In such a context, I suggest that we do not require a totalizing theory of paranoia so much as an understanding of the affective – even libidinal – aesthetic qualities of the conspiracy theory. In short, I am following Ed White’s injunction that we not search for “a saner understanding” of conspiracy, but rather seek to understand conspiracy’s role in the “production and praxis of culture.”¹² Such an understanding is only possible, I think, if we engage conspiracy’s recurrent tropes. To that end, I seek to call attention to a recursive pattern, a periodic rearticulation of the pornotrope and its imagined inverse among US political paranoids. Certainly, the counterconspiratorial thinking behind the Illuminati crisis emerged in a discrete political context of eighteenth-century partisanship, global revolution, Enlightenment secularism, and enthusiastic Christianity.¹³ The counterconspiratorial panic of late eighteenth-century New England was very different from paranoid conspiracy theories in the present: the fear, for instance, that a secret cabal of “social justice warriors” has systematically propagandized commercial video games to remove misogynist or racist content, or that a former Democratic presidential candidate trafficked children across international borders for the purposes of sexual exploitation.¹⁴ The politics and circumstances of these cases do not map easily onto one another. But, in each case, we can observe

¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in Sedgwick, ed., *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51, 142.

¹² White, “The Value of Conspiracy Theory,” 1, 26.

¹³ Jonathan Den Hartog, “Trans-Atlantic Anti-Jacobinism: Reaction and Religion,” *Early American Studies*, 11, 1 (2013), 135; Waterman, *Republic of Intellect*, 50–91.

¹⁴ Dan Beran, “4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump,” *Medium*, 14 Feb. 2017, at <https://medium.com/@DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb>, accessed 4 April 2017.

a similar set of aesthetic decisions through which the contingent politics of political paranoia have been mediated. In each case, we can observe what Eric Lott has called the “undoing of white male sexual sanctity.”¹⁵ A libidinal aesthetic economy premised upon the ongoing exploitation of women, beginning with women of color, gives way in these conspiracy theories to a fantasy of white masculine sexual subjection that is never realized in the material world.

Before considering the periodic rearticulation of these libidinal aesthetics, it will be productive to provide some context for the Illuminati panic itself – the scholarship about which is voluminous.¹⁶ The first account of the Illuminati to be printed in the United States was Jedidiah Morse’s Fast Day sermon of 9 May 1798, although there were forerunners and hints in the epistolary record of what was to come.¹⁷ John Robison’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy* (1797), purportedly a complete account of the Illuminati in Europe, had arrived in the United States sometime in March 1798, two months before Morse’s sermon, and had been republished in Philadelphia in mid-April.¹⁸ The panic, and the debate it engendered, fully emerged in the summer of 1798: in newspapers, pamphlets, and particularly sermons. Shortly after, Augustin Barruel’s *Memoirs of Jacobinism* (1799), another anti-Illuminati study published in Europe, arrived in the United States.¹⁹ The US anti-Illuminati writers were generally church leaders: Morse, Yale president Timothy Dwight, John Cotton Smith, and Elijah Parish among them.²⁰

¹⁵ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; first published 1993), 152.

¹⁶ Consider, for instance, Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (New York: Columbia University, 1918); Gordon S. Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 39, 3 (1982), 401–41; White, 1–31; Seth Cotlar, “The Federalists’ Transatlantic Cultural Offensive of 1798 and the Moderation of American Democratic Discourse,” in Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., *Beyond the Borders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 274–301; Waterman, *Republic of Intellect*, 50–91.

¹⁷ In January of the previous year, Morse received a letter from the Rev. John Erskine of Edinburgh, who hinted at the imagined cabal and mentioned the forthcoming publication of John Robison’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy* (1797). See James King Morse, *Jedidiah Morse: A Champion of New England Orthodoxy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 55. See also Stauffer, 233 n. 2.

¹⁸ See Jedidiah Morse, “For the Chronicle,” *Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser* (Boston), 14–18 June 1798, 4.

¹⁹ References to Barruel appeared as early as 24 June 1799 in the Connecticut *Courant*. See Stauffer, 311 n. 1.

²⁰ In chronological order see Timothy Dwight, *The Nature and Danger of Infidel Philosophy, Exhibited in Two Discourses, Addressed to the Candidates for the Baccalaureate, in Yale College, September 9th, 1797* (New Haven, CT: Geo. GE Bunce, 1799); Jedidiah Morse, *Doctor Morse’s Sermon on the National Fast, May 9th, 1798* (Boston: Samuel Hall, No.

Federalist partisans, such as William Brown and Timothy Dwight's brother, the poet and newspaper editor Theodore Dwight, also contributed.²¹ Moreover, printers published at least two novels based upon the conspiracy: Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (1799) and Sally Sayward Barrell Keating Wood's *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron* (1800). Finally, it was in 1799, as anti-Illuminati writers began to feel increasing pressure to substantiate their claims, that they more fully articulated the specific racial dangers faced by the new United States.²² During this period, counter-subversive writers speculated about whether the "sooty sons of Africa" would collaborate with foreign subversives.²³

That a conspiracy theory in the United States quickly transformed into a narrative of racial paranoia should be relatively unsurprising. The crisis emerged, after all, in a representational economy already structured by the subjection of black people. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century anti-slavery discourse in the US North was constitutive of a highly racialized sexual economy. Marcus Wood, for instance, suggests that "displays of extreme and perverse brutality against the black body" functioned for eighteenth-century readers as "sites of white pornographic projection."²⁴ Saidiya Hartman amplifies this claim when she explains that visual depictions and literary descriptions of beatings complicate the project of "beholding black suffering since the endeavor to bring pain close exploits the spectacle of the

53, Cornhill, 1798); Dwight, *The Duty of Americans*; John Cotton Smith, *Oration, Pronounced at Sharon, on the Anniversary of American Independence, 4th of July, 1798* (Litchfield, CT: T. Collier, 1798); Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon Preached at Charlestown, November 29, 1798, on the Anniversary Thanksgiving in Massachusetts* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1798); Morse, *A Sermon, exhibiting The Present Dangers, and Consequent Duties of the Citizens of the United States of America. Delivered at Charlestown, April 25, 1799, the Day of the National Fast* (Hartford: Reprinted by Hudson and Goodwin, 1799); Elijah Parish, *An Oration Delivered at Byfield July 4, 1799* (Newburyport: Angier March, 1799).

²¹ See Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford*; Theodore Dwight, *Oration Spoken at Hartford, in the State of Connecticut, on the Anniversary of American Independence, July 4th, 1798* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1798). See also Cicero (pseud.), *Cicero; or, A Discovery of a Clan of Conspirators against All Religions and Governments in The Whole World. Extracted from Robison, Mournier and Barruel; and interspersed with hints in due season* (Baltimore: J. Hayes, 1799). The Presbyterian minister and future Rutgers president William Linn would contribute as well. See William Linn, *A Discourse on National Sins: Delivered May 9, 1798; Being the Day Recommended by the President of the United States to be Observed as a Day of General Fast* (New York: T. & J. Swords, 1798), 22–23 n.

²² The first instance I have been able to locate is Morse, *A Sermon, exhibiting The Present Dangers*, esp. 25 n. A.

²³ [Sally Sayward Barrell Keating Wood], *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron* (Portsmouth, NH: Charles Peirce, 1800), 134.

²⁴ Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, Pornography* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 139.

body in pain.”²⁵ The well-known engravings by William Blake, which appeared in John Stedman’s *Narrative, of five years’ expedition, against the revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), perhaps best emblemize the libidinal economy I am describing. These images simultaneously registered a protest against black suffering and sexualized that suffering. In one image, a “Female Quadroon” appears in a translucent skirt. In another, a bare-breasted woman hangs by her hands from a tree, her body marked by the scourges of a whip. Stedman’s account was available and widely discussed in the United States as early as 1798.²⁶ The sexual exploitation of black women in the North, moreover, was not merely a matter of representation. The black writer Nancy Prince would recall, for instance, that her sister Silvia was “deluded away” from a position as a “nursery girl” in Boston and, by February 1816, coerced into performing sex acts to pay down debt.²⁷ While many of the counterconspiratorial writers of the Illuminati crisis favored the abolition of slavery, they were nonetheless implicated in a libidinal economy that trafficked in the material and representational subjection of black bodies.

Yet the conspiracy theorists of the Illuminati crisis fantasized about the *inversion* of the pornotropic aesthetic mode through which black women had been made available for sexual subjection. When William Brown suggested that French revolutionaries would join self-emancipated black men in “the impure and shocking death-dance of Africa,” he was (perhaps inadvertently) calling attention to a material, representational, and libidinal economy in which white men operated at the center of power and discourse. Brown’s promise that the sexual prerogatives of white US American men would be upended in favor of black men and foreigners traded in the simultaneous fear and pleasure evoked by sado-masochistic play. Just as William Blake’s engravings enabled white men to linger on the exposed and scourged body of a black woman, Brown’s promise that black *men* would let loose their “demonic lust” upon white “virgins” likewise allowed readers and listeners to indulge in a fantasy of racial humiliation that was materially harmless to the white men construed as its ideal consumers.²⁸

The fantasies of racial subjection enabled by the Illuminati crisis in the United States were unlike anything seen during the same paranoid crisis in

²⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20.

²⁶ John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative, of five years’ expedition, against the revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the wild coast of South America*, Volume I, engraver William Blake (London: J. Johnson, 1796), 201, 297, 327. See also “An Account of some of the Cruelties Exercised on the Negro Slaves in Surinam,” *Philadelphia Monthly Magazine*, 2, 9 (1798), 127.

²⁷ Nancy Prince, *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*, 3rd edn (Boston: Published by the Author, 1856), 12, 14.

²⁸ Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford*, 6, 20.

Europe. This difference between European and US countersubversion is particularly important because, when New England's countersubversive polemicists warned of Illuminati conspiracy, they were describing a Gothic doppelgänger of their own revolutionary politics. The Illuminati began twenty-two years earlier not as a countersubversive fantasy but as an Enlightenment intellectual society. Indeed, this society ran a chronologically parallel course to the American Revolution. German academic Adam Weishaupt founded the Illuminati in 1776 at the University of Ingolstadt, in Bavaria.²⁹ The group's members were part of Europe's Republic of Letters. They were political thinkers who wrote to one another using classical pseudonyms, including Cato, Brutus, and Philo, just as numerous revolutionaries in British North America had done.³⁰ These names gave a marble polish to what was, in many ways, a modern project of remaking the world in the name of virtue, self-government, and democracy. Carl Theodore, Duke of Bavaria, banned the Illuminati on 22 June 1784, a year after the United States signed the Treaty of Paris. On 16 August 1787 (a month before the US Constitutional Convention adjourned), Carl Theodore issued a final edict against the Enlightenment-era society.³¹ A few of its members, including Weishaupt, would escape persecution.³² But the influence of this brief confederacy would live on. British reactionaries would link the French Revolution to the (imagined) influence of the Illuminati.³³ But it was only in the

²⁹ Adam Weishaupt officially founded the Illuminati on 1 May 1776. See Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati*, 151; Lindsay Porter, *Who Are the Illuminati? Exploring the Myth of the Secret Society* (London: Collins and Brown, 2005), 15. Thomas Jefferson began drafting the Declaration of Independence the same month. See Thomas Jefferson, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Volume I, 1760–1776, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 345 n.

³⁰ For the use of classical pseudonyms during the American Revolution see Erin Shalev, "Ancient Masks, American Fathers: Classical Pseudonyms during the American Revolution and Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 25, 3 (2003), 152–72, esp. 156–7, 160 n. 19. For the use of pseudonyms by the Illuminati see John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy* (Boston and Los Angeles: Western Islands, 1967; first published 1797), 117.

³¹ Stauffer, 175–77, 182–83. See also Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 18; and Gregory Claeys and Christine Lattak, "Radicalism, Republicanism and Revolutionism," in Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys, eds., *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 200–54, 225.

³² Illuminati founder Adam Weishaupt fled persecution and escaped. See Stauffer, 178–79 n. 4.

³³ See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Penguin UK, 2004; first published 1789), 265 n.; Robison, 207.

United States that reactionary polemicists fantasized about the sadomasochistic racial politics of Illuminati conspirators. More than a decade after the demise of the Bavarian intellectual society, one US writer would imagine that the Illuminati were readying “powerful engines of revolution.”³⁴ Having been disbanded in 1787, the Illuminati were engaged in no such activity. But expressing concern about the actions of *other* Enlightenment-era revolutionaries provided a means of casting doubt on the project of US democracy itself.

In short, by aestheticizing the sadomasochistic racial dimensions of a conspiracy theory, the paranoids of the US Illuminati crisis produced a complex map of political power in which they and their Gothic doppelgängers operated at the precarious center of discourse. In the world produced by these writers, racialization enabled a proliferation of sexual fantasies that all served the libidinal desires of an imagined white masculine readership. These fantasies derived their erotic *jouissance*, moreover, from a materially harmless description of racial humiliation at the hands of imagined conspirators – the chronological and ideological twins of American patriots.³⁵ To imagine Illuminati conspirators and their black allies as sexual sadists, in short, was to acknowledge racial democracy as a kind of sadism. To imagine the sexual subjection of white women and white men at the hands of these conspirators was to acknowledge the precarity of a democratic politics built upon a foundation of racial domination. As these fantasies played out in the pages of pamphlets and sermons, they revealed fundamental, unresolved questions about the relation between race, sexual domination, and nascent democratic politics.

Thirty years ago, Hortense Spillers observed that the transatlantic trade in human beings produced a condition in which “the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver.” The bodies of enslaved people are – from the perspective of enslavers – easily evacuated of gendered meaning and transformed into “the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality.”³⁶ More recently, scholars such as Ariane Cruz, Jennifer Christine Nash, Anthony Paul Farley, and Alexander Weheliye have taken up Spillers’s call to consider the sadomasochistic dimensions of racialized fantasy. For Farley, whiteness is “a way of feeling pleasure in and about

³⁴ Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford*, 20.

³⁵ As Roland Barthes has it, *jouissance* (or bliss) in a text “unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.” See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973), 14.

³⁶ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 67.

one's body," a libidinal experience through which "power masks itself as nature."³⁷ For Nash, likewise, race functions as a "technology of domination and a technology of pleasure."³⁸ Each of these scholars calls attention to the sadomasochistic dimensions of racial fantasy, the ways in which racialization provides the aesthetic space in which to stage relations of power, to indulge in what Cruz calls the "unspeakable pleasures" of "racialized abjection."³⁹ For the white men whose writing in 1799 transmitted implausible accounts of impending foreign subversion, the libidinal aesthetics of racialization provided the means by which they could map themselves into those relations. The sexuality of black men would be instrumental to the desires of foreign revolutionaries, they imagined, just as the sexual subjection of black women would prefigure the sexual subjection of white women. For these counterconspiratorial fantasists, operating at the intersections of whiteness and masculinity, the sadomasochistic fantasies of racialization provided the critical aesthetic terrain upon which to organize themselves in relation with one another and with the larger world.

Importantly, these men positioned themselves in the center of their paranoid discourse. The Illuminati, recall, were of a piece with the Enlightenment-era project that produced US democracy in the first place. Adam Weishaupt's intellectual society embodied the "Spirit of 1776" just as readily as did the Sons of Liberty. The counterconspiratorial writers of the Illuminati crisis wove a web of imagined, sadomasochistic relations through which readers might come to understand the pleasures and perils of racialization. The body of texts they produced (primarily published sermons and pamphlets) compelled readers to visualize the relations between political and human bodies. In short, foreign revolutionaries and black men represented – for the counterconspiratorial writers of the Illuminati crisis, at least – not only a threat to the demos, but a Gothic, sadomasochistic corollary to nascent US democracy. To these writers, black and foreign bodies were at once an ongoing threat to political cohesion and an object of aesthetic desire that could be consumed as terror, pleasure, and eroticism.

³⁷ Anthony Paul Farley, "The Black Body as Fetish Object," *Oregon Law Review*, 79, 3 (1997), 457–535, 458, 467.

³⁸ Nash's work represents a "critical departure from scholarly work on race" because she considers how black women experience the pleasures of racialization. See Jennifer Christine Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

³⁹ Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 23.

THE LIBIDINAL PLEASURES OF PARANOIA IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

What does the pleasurable consumption of a conspiracy theory look like in practice? Importantly, such pleasurable erotic conspiracy theories do not exist in isolation. They are embedded in a complex web of conspiracy fictions. Indeed, recent scholarship has revealed that the Illuminati crisis was only one among several paranoid fantasies associated with the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and the US quasi-war with France. As Chandos Michael Brown has observed, late eighteenth-century reactionaries expressed a fear that emergent ideas about women's emancipation, particularly as articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft, were part of a larger, world-revolutionary conspiracy.⁴⁰ Duncan Faherty, moreover, has traced a widespread panic among newspaper editors and civic officials in 1802 as a flotilla of French prison ships reached the US coastline. Numerous observers feared that reenslaved revolutionaries from Saint-Domingue and elsewhere in the West Indies would escape into the countryside, fomenting racial revolution. Faherty observes that stories of these prisoners circulated even after the ships themselves had departed, and that these stories often echoed the Gothic horrors depicted in popular novels of the period.⁴¹ Like the early twenty-first-century United States, the late eighteenth-century United States was a place of counterconspiratorial panic – panic very often made manifest in the aesthetic mode of sadomasochistic racialization. Anti-Illuminati texts not only articulated a disciplinary racial project. Rather, they were consumed as pleasurable, libidinal racialization alongside similar narratives, both the fictional and the (putatively) factual.

To illustrate how anti-Illuminati fantasists spoke in the register of the pleasurable and recognizably Gothic, I would like to return briefly to the Hartford attorney William Brown's prediction that the Illuminati and their black allies would systematically rape and murder as they marched northward to New England. Brown's predictions are shot through with the pleasurable literary, the pleasurable Gothic. At a time when the novelist Charles Brockden Brown (no relation) is articulating a theory of the Gothic novelist as a kind of "painter," William Brown is suggesting that his listeners and readers "paint" for themselves a mental image of Illuminati violence.⁴² William Brown writes,

⁴⁰ Chandos Michael Brown, "Mary Wollstonecraft; or, The Female Illuminati: The Campaign against Women and 'Modern Philosophy' in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 15, 3 (1995), 389–424, 420.

⁴¹ Faherty, "'The Mischief That Awaits Us,'" 63, 67, 78–79.

⁴² [Charles Brockden Brown], *Edgar Huntly; or, The Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, Volume I (Philadelphia: H. Maxwell, 1799), 3.

Imagination already conceives, myriads of furious Africans, collecting together the materials of vengeance, and marching in dread array, to the dwellings of their masters. Paint to yourselves, cities given up to indiscriminate plunder, villages sacked and burned, the country desolated, and the fields “watered with the blood of their cultivators.” Listen to the groans of wretched white-men, butchered by their infuriate slaves, the shrieks of mothers, and of virgins, a prey to more than demoniac lust and barbarity, and the cries of infants,
 – “stabbed at the breast,
 Or reeking on the points of sportive javelins.”⁴³

Brown calls upon his readers to perform acts of imagination. “Paint to yourselves” the portrait of Illuminati violence, he writes. “Imagination already conceives” the coming horror, he suggests. Indeed, Brown’s eighteenth-century readers were primed to conceive of the images Brown asked them to paint to themselves. Much of the passage is borrowed or adapted from other sources: a popular translation of Cicero’s oration against Catiline (“the shrieks of mothers, the flight of children, and the violation of the vestal virgins”⁴⁴), an essay in the *British Mercury* (“overflowed with the blood of their cultivators”⁴⁵), and even the Bible (“materials of vengeance”: Revelation 22:9). But Brown reveals his ultimate aesthetic project with the final quotation, a line from Henry Brooke’s play *Gustavus Vasa* (1739). As Laura Doyle describes it, the well-known drama retold the story of the “‘Gothic’ liberator of Sweden.”⁴⁶ Much of the eighteenth-century literature that we would describe today as “Gothic” would not have been described as such until the 1820s, and yet this literature was quite often associated with medieval castles and the histories of Germanic peoples. Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) was subtitled “a Gothic story.”⁴⁷ Charles Brockden Brown described the wilderness setting of his novel *Edgar Huntly* (1799) as more frightening than the “Gothic castles and chimeras” of its European corollaries.⁴⁸ And *Gustavus Vasa* was absolutely “Gothic” in this sense: pleurably frightening, sadistically violent, and (as its author described it) “Gothic and glorious.”⁴⁹ In short, William Brown’s prediction of Illuminati violence drew upon a recognizable, and even pleasurable, literary

⁴³ Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford*, 20.

⁴⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Against Catiline,” in *Cicero’s Select Orations, Translated into English*, trans. William Duncan (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1792), 186–207, 197.

⁴⁵ Jacques Mallet du Pan, “An Historical Essay upon the Destruction of the Helvetic League and Liberty,” *British Mercury*, 1, 1 (1798), 11–238, 6.

⁴⁶ Laura Doyle, *Freedom’s Empire: Race and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity, 1640–1940* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 191–92.

⁴⁷ See “Gothic, adj. and n., Draft Additions December 2007,” in *OED Online*, March 2017, Oxford University Press.

⁴⁸ Henry Brooke, *Gustavus Vasa*, in *The Poetical Works of Henry Brooke, Esq.* (Dublin: Printed for the Editor, 1792), 127–233.

register. The coming violence would look precisely like the violence of a popular “Gothic” play. Moreover, with the 1789 publication of formerly enslaved Londoner Olaudah Equiano’s life story, numerous readers might have known that the well-known black writer also went by another name: Gustavus Vassa.⁵⁰ In short, Brown’s description of horrific violence came laden with associations – with blackness, with the Gothic, with the pleurably literary. Through Brown, readers came to recognize the violent potentials of black men as akin to the violence those same readers already consumed in the safety of circulating libraries and parlors.

I have suggested that we can best understand the Illuminati crisis as a period of political paranoia, on the one hand, and as a literary project, on the other. As a literary project, moreover, the crisis borrowed its aesthetics from violent, even erotic, literature. The records of the New York Society Library at the time, for instance, hint at just such a pleasurable relation between political paranoia and aesthetic consumption. Library patron John J. Watts checked out John Robison’s anti-Illuminati treatise *Proofs of a Conspiracy* (1797) within days of checking out Anne Radcliffe’s Gothic novel *The Italian; or, The Confessional of the Black Penitents* (1797). Patron Rebecca Laight checked out Augustin Barruel’s countersubversive study of the Illuminati only *one day* after returning the final volume of *Rash Vows; or, The Effects of Enthusiasm* (1799), the fictional story of a woman whose sexual desire prevents her from keeping her vow of chastity. Library patron Thomas Delves also checked out Barruel’s study and, on the day he returned it, borrowed all three volumes of *Rash Vows*.⁵¹ Novelistic treatments of illicit sexual desire were very much of a piece with ostensibly factual accounts of Illuminati machinations: accounts of abortions that concealed illicit sexual relations, of the rape of white “virgins” by African men, and of secret cabals between enslavers and their enslaved laborers.⁵² Several of the library’s patrons – including John T. Glover, John Le Conte, and John Mercier – checked out ostensibly factual accounts of the Illuminati *and* novelistic treatments of the international conspirators.⁵³ While it is impossible to know precisely how library

⁵⁰ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 69; and Doyle, 191–92.

⁵¹ “John J. Watts,” “Rebecca Laight,” and “Thomas Delves,” *City Readers*, New York Society Library, at <http://cityreaders.nysoclib.org>, accessed 22 May 2017.

⁵² [William Bently], *Extracts from Professor Robison’s “Proofs of a Conspiracy”* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1799), 17; Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford*, 20; and Peter Porcupine [pseud. of William Cobbett], *Detection of a Conspiracy, formed by the United Irishmen, with the Evident Intention of Aiding the Tyrants of France in Subverting the Government of the United States* (Philadelphia: William Cobbett, 6 May 1798), 28–29.

⁵³ All three checked out Brown’s *Ormond* in addition to Robison’s *Proofs*, Barruel’s *Memoirs*, or both. See “John T. Glover,” “John Le Conte,” and “John Mercier,” *City Readers*, New York Society Library, at <http://cityreaders.nysoclib.org>, accessed 22 May 2017.

patrons were interacting with these texts (or even if they were reading them at all), one can nonetheless observe in these records that the ostensibly factual anti-Illuminati discourse occupied the same temporal and generic space as Gothic fiction.

In the United States, moreover, the authors of Gothic fiction wrote obsessively about gendered and racialized bodies. In Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (1799), the suspected Illuminatus and attempted rapist Ormond occasionally disguises himself as a "negro and a chimney-sweep" to gather intelligence.⁵⁴ In Sally Sayward Barrell Keating Wood's *Julia, and The Illuminated Baron* (1800), a less widely known novel of the Illuminati crisis, a central character nearly drowns and, when he awakes, is surrounded by "sooty sons of Africa." The initial threat – who are these black men? – gives way to relief as he realizes that he has landed at Mount Vernon. The black men, he writes, are "the servants, or rather humble friends, of the Illustrious WASHINGTON; from him they had learnt to follow the dictates of humanity, to obey the impulse of benevolence, and to tread on the broad paths of philanthropy."⁵⁵ Wood's language strains for control of the racial hierarchy. The enslaved men are, initially, "servants" to the former President. Then they are imagined as "humble friends." They have learned from their enslaver – or, rather, their "friend" – to "obey" and to "follow." *Ormond* and *Julia* were published within months of each other, and each expresses profound anxiety about the relation between blackness and international conspiracy. Would the US racial hierarchy provide a tool of foreign subversion (as in the case of *Ormond*), or would the loyalty of sub-sovereign US subjects remain inviolable (as in the case of *Julia*)? The answer was hardly a foregone conclusion.

Anti-Illuminati sermons, orations, pamphlets, and even novels enabled writers and readers to focus their attention inward. The lurid descriptions provided by these texts were, in many ways, the work of fantasists concerned with and titillated by the imagined inversion of a system of sexual domination by white men. For one anonymous countersubversive writer, for instance, the true horror of the Illuminati lay in their attack on biological reproduction. He described French revolutionaries as murdering the "unborn fruit of the womb," and added that the present political moment was a Gothic doppelgänger of a reproductive woman's body: "big with danger and pregnant with horrid machinations."⁵⁶ For another anti-Illuminati orator, the impending conflagration was a punishment of Christians in the North for having

⁵⁴ [Charles Brockden Brown], *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (New York: G. Forman, for H. Caritat, 1799), 156.

⁵⁵ [Wood], *Julia*, 134–35.

⁵⁶ Cicero (pseud.), *Cicero*, 61–62.

allowed the sin of slavery to persist. “We know where we are most vulnerable,” he writes, “and melancholy is the tale of St. Domingo.”⁵⁷ Countersubversive texts wove together fantasies of sexual and racial violence, but these fantasies often bore little relation to the actual violence of Atlantic revolutions. They were solipsistic fictions, and very often fictions that did little to conceal their fictionality. One countersubversive writer even suggested that “slaveholders in either Carolina or Virginia” had set their enslaved laborers free in order to “involve the whole country in rebellion and bloodshed.”⁵⁸ Such a claim – that southern enslavers would *intentionally* foment a revolution by the enslaved – only makes sense if one does not seek to inquire too closely into the actual operations of political and economic power and instead focusses exclusively upon the object of horror and desire: bodies construed through discourse as black, as female, or as both.

Indeed, horror and desire constituted the twinned manifestations of counterconspiratorial fantasists. For Morse, French subversion constituted an act of national seduction. Nations, he writes, are “easy prey” unless they are “vigorous, active, and united in opposing” these “insidious and seductive arts.”⁵⁹ Literary scholars have long noted the relation between seduction and US democracy. For Elizabeth Barnes, narratives of seduction in the early republic were the inevitable result of “the complicated relationship between coercion and consent characteristic of democratic disciplinary agendas.”⁶⁰ In short, a society based upon (ostensibly) horizontal affiliation required a discourse that could parse the distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate versions of coerced consent – that could distinguish between the loving but coercive father and the coercive (but illegitimate) lover. As a result, novels of seduction proliferated, including novels featuring Illuminati as villains and antagonists. The proliferation of such novels is notable in this context because Morse echoes their operative logics when he describes the violence of black men as an example of the “seductive arts.” Countersubversive writers feared that foreigners – from French *philosophes* to West Indian black soldiers – would seduce and coerce sub-sovereign members of the new US family (white women, enslaved blacks) into unsanctioned relations of sexual violence. But they also *fantasized* about this possibility, and their fantasies took on the qualities of popular, Gothic fiction. They consumed their horror as pleasure.

Racial democracy depends upon a set of mediating fictions – about membership in a political community, about the collective past, about the inevitable

⁵⁷ Linn, *A Discourse on National Sins*, 33–34.

⁵⁸ Porcupine, 28–29.

⁵⁹ Morse, *A Sermon, exhibiting The Present Dangers*, 12, original emphasis.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 11.

future. And yet consumers of these fictions need not believe in their factuality in order to adhere to their operative logics. Fictions are pleasurable. It hardly matters whether eighteenth-century readers distinguished between the ostensibly factual accounts of Illuminati collaboration with enslaved black people and the fictional account of Ormond covering himself with soot to pass for a “negro” in the streets of Philadelphia. Readers consumed the obviously fictional alongside the ostensibly factual. Library patrons borrowed putatively accurate accounts of the Illuminati even as they borrowed Gothic novels. Readers found in accounts of the Illuminati conspiracy, moreover, the kind of titillation they encountered in such Gothic novels. Countersubversive writers described white New England women transformed into “concubines.”⁶¹ They described secret sexual liaisons concealed by illicit abortions.⁶² They offered readers the chance to linger over words describing the rape of white virginal women by “infuriate” black men.⁶³ Fiction, like race, is as much a technology of pleasure as a technology of power – and conspiracy theories are indeed a kind of fiction. In a racial democracy, the production and consumption of countersubversive fiction authorizes libidinal pleasures. The consumer of such fiction is offered a totalizing view of the world. He is offered control over a fictive field of discourse. And he is offered fantasies of sexual domination and sexual subjection that are (to him) materially harmless. Debates about the political authority of orthodox Congregational churches, a central point of contention during the 1790s, have long since been left in the past. Yet the aesthetics of the Illuminati crisis – essentially the masochistic pornotropes of Illuminati rape fantasies – have proven alarmingly recurrent. They are, I would suggest, very much with us today.

THE PORNOTROPES OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL REACTION

Shortly before 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time on 7 October 2016, less than an hour after the leak of a video in which then Republican presidential nominee Donald J. Trump bragged about groping women without their consent, the Wikileaks website began to release emails from the account of Hillary Clinton campaign manager John Podesta. Once Podesta’s emails began to circulate, numerous users on the Internet imageboard *4chan* began to speculate about Podesta’s frequent references to “cheese pizza.” For those familiar with the operations of a political campaign – an organization that depends upon numerous volunteers, interns, and staffers – the idea of a campaign

⁶¹ Dwight, *The Duty of Americans*, 20–21.

⁶³ Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford*, 20.

⁶² [Bently], *Extracts*, 17.

manager ordering cheese pizza would seem innocuous. But on *4chan*, “cheese pizza” frequently served as code for child pornography. Equally suspicious, to anonymous *4chan* writers, were Podesta’s discussions about Italian fine dining, including Ligurian cuisine. Surely, *4chan* users speculated, references to “walnut sauce” must have been code for sexual activity. Within a month, *4chan* users had collectively authored an elaborate conspiracy theory. According to this theory, Podesta and his brother, Tony Podesta, were the masterminds of an international child-sex ring centered around a Washington, DC pizza parlor. The two had, according to this theory, kidnapped the white British child Madeleine McCann (who had disappeared in Portugal in 2007) and had organized lurid forms of sexual exploitation and murder involving then Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton, then President Barack Obama, and others. From the imagined subterranean seraglio beneath the pizza parlor, to the wholly invented “kill room” in the back of the restaurant’s kitchen, to the Italian American aesthetes behind the entire operation, the story that emerged was positively Gothic.⁶⁴

It was, moreover, pornotropic. Whatever else it might be, *4chan* is a website through which users share highly racialized pornography. Even more significantly, political discussions on the website often center on racialized fantasies of sexual subjection. Users openly discuss, for instance, whether white women disproportionately favor progressive social policies because they are “subconsciously longing” for the bodies of “brown exotic” men, for sexual liaisons with “dominant animalistic” racial others.⁶⁵ In these discussions, questions about the free movement of people or the future of democratic systems often devolve into discussions about the imagined, subversive alliance between global intellectual elites and subaltern and postcolonial subjects. Discussions on *4chan*, in other words, manifest the same sadomasochistic aesthetics that have characterized prior Gothic political fictions. It should come as no surprise, then, that *4chan* users collectively authored a Gothic narrative in which black men, white women, and cosmopolitan elites (in this case, two Italian American men) conspired to kidnap, rape, murder, and seize control of the US nation-state.

Many observers of the present political crisis have settled upon the question whether those who articulate conspiracy theories truly believe them. The *New Yorker*’s Amy Davidson, for instance, observed that high-ranking

⁶⁴ Gregor Aisch, Jon Huang, and Cecilia Kang, “Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories,” *New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2016, at www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/10/business/media/pizzagate.html, accessed May 21, 2017.

⁶⁵ Anonymous [ID: zY4s9Luf], “Why Did Women Overwhelmingly Voted [*sic*] for Macron,” *4chan*, last modified 9 May 2017, accessed 10 May 2017.

Republican officials, including former national security adviser Michael Flynn, were responsible for disseminating this story, which came to be known as Pizzagate. “Which is more alarming,” Davidson asked, “the idea that Pizzagate is being promoted by politically motivated cynics who don’t actually believe it, or that people with influence and proximity to power, including people with access to the [then] President-elect, are really susceptible to this sort of nonsense.”⁶⁶ I would suggest, however, that Davidson’s question misses something important about the aesthetic experience of countersubversive fantasy. Conspiracy theories, I suggest, can be understood as objects of erotic pleasure. When eighteenth-century countersubversive William Bently published in Boston a pamphlet summarizing the charges against the Illuminati, he lingered upon the rumor that the organization’s founder, Adam Weishaupt, had carried on an illicit affair with his brother’s wife, and that this affair had culminated in the abortion of an illegitimate fetus.⁶⁷ Bently lingered, in short, on the titillating. When William Brown offered his own description of the Illuminati, he described for readers the rape of white virginal women by black men.⁶⁸ When Jedidiah Morse imagined the Illuminati in the United States, he described an army of black men practicing the “seductive arts.”⁶⁹ The pleasures of fiction, particularly Gothic or erotic fiction, are hardly rational, but they nonetheless provide a means of ordering the world.

The pleasures of such fictions explain, at least in part, the ongoing appeal of their pornotropic aesthetics, and even of the “Illuminati” itself as a symbol for organizing these aesthetics. “Guccifer 2.0” – the online persona now widely believed to have served as a front for the security services of the Russian Federation as they orchestrated a hack of the Clinton campaign – claimed in June 2016 that his alleged ties to the Russian government were nothing but a lie spread by the Illuminati, writing, “F[***] the Illuminati and their conspiracies!!!!!!!!!!!!”⁷⁰ The choice to identify the Illuminati as the actual source of the threat was no mere accident. Several of those spreading the Pizzagate conspiracy theory associated the alleged pedophilia with the Illuminati themselves, implying that the contemporary heirs of eighteenth-century revolutionary *philosophes* were now participating in lurid acts of kidnapping, pedophilia, and

⁶⁶ Amy Davidson, “The Age of Donald Trump and Pizzagate,” *New Yorker*, 5 Dec. 2016, at www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/the-age-of-donald-trump-and-pizzagate, accessed 16 May 2017.

⁶⁷ [Bently], *Extracts*, 17.

⁶⁸ Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford*, 6, 20.

⁶⁹ Morse, *A Sermon, exhibiting The Present Dangers*, 12.

⁷⁰ *United States of America v. Viktor Borisovich Netyksho et al.*, Criminal No. 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1030, 1028A, 1956, and 3551 et seq. (United States District Court for the District of Columbia, 13 June 2018), 15.

murder.⁷¹ These imagined acts recalled the lurid, and highly racialized, fears and desires of William Brown, William Bently, Jedidiah Morse, and others.

In “The Paranoid Style,” Hofstadter observed in passing that conspiracy very often functions as a kind of “pornography” for political outsiders.⁷² I would suggest, however, that the pornotropes of paranoid countersubversion represent not only pornographic titillation, but also a coherent political aesthetic. Figurations of erotic desire and disgust, as Laura Mulvey writes, are very often significations that fix and freeze historic events “outside of rational memory and individual chronology.”⁷³ Objects of desire and repulsion, Mulvey contends, retain the markers through which we can trace their origins in the real world of suffering, violence, and trauma. It should be unsurprising, then, that those who share child pornography under the sobriquet “cheese pizza” would offer their own paranoid readings of a Washington, DC pizza parlor. It should be unsurprising that those who lived in cities where nominally free black women were forced via debt to perform sex acts for white men would fixate upon the erotics of racial subjection. In the pages of the *New Yorker*, Davidson asked if US political conservatives “are really susceptible to this sort of nonsense.”⁷⁴ But the “nonsense” of political paranoia makes sense to its consumers, even if it is nonrational, implausible, and Gothic. Paranoia is fiction, and fiction is pleasurable.

The resurgent far right in the United States has revealed itself as a group united as much by the sadomasochistic aesthetics of countersubversive fantasy as by a coherent political program. The newly visible interplay between the pornographic and the political, moreover, has forced journalists for legacy publications to explain to an often baffled readership what, precisely, is meant by the sudden emergence of cuckolds and other archaic sexual figures in electoral discourse. I have suggested here, then, that scholars and other observers turn with new attention to the sadomasochistic racial aesthetics of countersubversion’s long history in the United States. A close examination of paranoid theories – and even a cursory examination of many of them – reveals an underlying aesthetic logic organized around the titillating fictions of racial masochism and racial sadism. Conspiracy fictions in the United States, from those of the Illuminati crisis to those of Pizzagate, are united transtemporally by the pornotropes that their authors encode. Historians and cultural critics since Hofstadter have treated the Illuminati crisis as the

⁷¹ Matthew Odam, “How Austin’s East Side Pies Became Target of Fake #Pizzagate,” *Austin American Statesman*, 7 Dec. 2016, at www.statesman.com/news/20161208/how-austins-east-side-pies-became-target-of-fake-pizzagate.

⁷² Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style,” 80.

⁷³ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity: Cinema and the Mind’s Eye* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), xiv, 5.

⁷⁴ Davidson.

antetype of paranoid politics in US culture. Certainly, it was the first such national crisis in the republican period. We should be unsurprised, then, by the sadomasochistic racial aesthetics of the Illuminati panic. Such aesthetics, after all, have reappeared even in conspiracy fictions of the present.

Pornotropic aesthetics, moreover, reveal as they recur. Even as they distort underlying conditions of racial domination, they call attention to such conditions. The fictions of countersubversive fantasists, in short, offer a window onto how those fantasists imagine themselves into a relation with the world. When Anthony Paul Farley suggests that whiteness provides a means “of feeling pleasure in and about one’s body,” or when Jennifer Christine Nash suggests that race functions as a “technology of domination and a technology of pleasure,” both are revealing of race what has long been recognized of fictions.⁷⁵ Fictions provide the pleasure of a confirmed self and the periodic *jouissance* of that self’s momentary erasure. The act of reading, Roland Barthes suggests, enables the reader to set aside the real and to surrender to the erotics of language. Barthes writes, “the reader can keep saying: *I know these are only words, but all the same ...* (I am moved as though these words were uttering a reality).”⁷⁶ In such a context, the lines between fact and fiction are, very literally, immaterial. The subterranean seraglio beneath a pizza parlor echoes with the same “compulsion” as stories of a European rapist disguised as a “negro chimney-sweep,” as an “infuriate” black man escaped from bondage.⁷⁷ What is missing from these accounts – the actual exploitation of women, including and often especially women of color – remains an unacknowledged background condition. What is visible instead is the fantasy of erotic erasure, an aesthetic of white masculine subjection that periodically obliterates (and restores) the power and pleasure of whiteness and maleness. Readers – turning pages in an eighteenth-century pamphlet or scrolling across a twenty-first-century imageboard – are “moved as though these words [are] uttering a reality.”⁷⁸ They are moved by an aesthetics of their own subjection. They are moved to a kind of bliss.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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⁷⁵ Farley, “The Black Body as Fetish Object,” 458, 467; Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 3.

⁷⁶ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 47, original emphasis.

⁷⁷ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy*, 215; [Brown], *Ormond*, 156; Brown, *An Oration, Spoken at Hartford*, 20.

⁷⁸ Barthes, 47.